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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether peer tutoring in writing would lead to writing improvement. In a kindergarten-first grade classroom three children were tutored by fellow students, while three other students worked alone. The children's writing samples were collected and evaluated in three areas: spelling, longer sentences, and greater number of words in the piece. Results indicated that of the three children who worked with a tutor, two showed much improved writing while the third improved a little. Of the three students writing alone, all remained at about the same level. (SR)

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine whether peer tutoring in writing would lead to writing improvement. Six kindergartners and first graders, consisting of three males and three females, from the class of 22 children participated in the study. Over a period of three weeks, the children either worked individually or worked with an assigned partner during the writing period. During this study, two of the students working with partners improved their writing measurably, and one improved slightly while the other three remained at about the same level. Because two of the subjects did improve, further studies should be done to determine how peer tutoring can be most effectively used in the classroom.

In the book Write On: A Conference Approach to Writing, Jo-Ann Parry and David Hornsby describe various aspects of the collaboration process in writing, including teacher-student and student-student collaboration. In the section on peer collaboration, they state "Children see other children as resources and use each other as such." (Parry and Dickinson, p. 82) In a classroom, children will often go to others for help with writing, but only if the class set up provides for this interaction. A freedom of interaction and working style must exist in a class for collaboration to take place. Parry and Hornsby believe that this type of collaboration becomes spontaneous in classrooms where children have the freedom to move around the class during the writing period.

In describing why peer collaboration works, the authors say that because all of the class members have had similar learning experiences and practice with collaborative exercises, they are often able to help fellow students better than the teacher can. Not only do the students have knowledge of the content and the collaboration process, they also have the advantage of the informal peer relationship, rather than the more formal teacher/learner relationship. The advantage is

that it is often easier to accept help from someone on your level. Actually, students familiar with the collaborative process will be able to tutor each other and guide each other toward the right answer instead of just giving the answer, thus providing for a greater learning experience. Not only can students teach each other, they can also learn more themselves about the writing collaboration process and writing skills.

In agreement with the above description of the social nature of the collaboration process, Pamela Crouse and Mary Davey define collaboration as "the initiation of a social act for the purpose of learning" (Crouse and Davey, p. 757) in their article "Collaborative Learning: Insights from Our Children". This statement covers the process aspect rather than the content knowledge aspect. The authors believe that collaboration should be initiated by the students themselves through their choices of: with whom they want to work, when they want to work with others, and on what assignments. Again the classroom environment is a key factor.

During their interviews with children to discover what was most effective about peer collaboration and what children liked best about working together, Crouse

and Davey found that some children received good ideas from those with whom they worked, some got help with spelling, and some got help with mechanical problems such as capitalization. Children realized that some of their class members were "experts" in different areas and sought help from those peers. Another benefit of collaboration was that the students often worked longer on a piece written with a peer than on a piece written alone. More people mean more ideas. So, many ideas could be generated in these group situations which could feasibly lead to longer stories. In concluding that peer collaboration has distinct benefits, Crouse and Davey state "We now understand that learning is best facilitated when children are allowed to collaborate with one another." (Crouse and Davey, p. 766)

In the article "Social Interaction and the Writing Process", Roberta Long and Laurie Bulgarella include a Piagetian idea that is relevant to writing process: that knowledge is "promoted by social interaction, i.e., the exchanging of points of view." (Long and Bulgarella, p. 166) Peer collaboration during writing is cited as an example of this social interaction, since peers working together is definitely a social as

well as an academic encounter. In this study as in others, it was discovered that while writing together, children talk a lot and do a great deal of thinking out loud. This verbal communication and thinking surely is a vital component of the collaboration process. Collaborative writing in the classroom has many benefits to the students, among which these authors found enhancement of both creativity and individuality in writing as well as improvement in the technical points involved in writing.

In "Research Currents: Play and Learning to Write" by Colette Daiute, this author as well notes that children use talking to develop their literacy skills. She found a central part of the development of literary skills is collaboration during the writing process. When children talk during writing, they can explore all facets of the writing process and become more familiar with them, and when faced with a problem during writing, the writers can use all of their combined talents to solve it. Daiute found favorable results in her study which showed that children improve all aspects of their writing, from learning new words to gaining new ideas. In fact, "most of the collaborative pairs...[were] productive, in many cases

showing improvements after collaborative writing that they did not make after several individual composing sessions." (Daiute, p. 663) However, Daiute reminds the reader that the key to successful collaborative writing is in selecting compatible partners.

Chris Rayers' article "Writing Should be Sharing" also points to the careful selection of partners. It is essential to the process; selecting two students that will get along well is just as important as selecting two students whose writing abilities will complement each other. Other noteworthy gains were also made in Rayer's study. He found that not only did students find collaborative writing agreeable, they also showed academic gains. Benefits to be gained from paired writing included help with spelling and with writing styles.

The study by David K. Dickinson, "Cooperation, Collaboration, and a Computer: integrating a computer into a first-second grade writing program", also recorded the positive benefits of peer writing collaboration. Dickinson found that not only did peer collaboration lead to increased self-esteem, it also "resulted in increased academic achievement." (Dickinson, p. 358) The academic improvements were

similar to the previous studies and included: more creative ideas for stories, longer stories, and better content. Something no one else reported but that is a significant discovery was that children working together seemed to get more excited about their writing and enjoy it more. Peer collaboration, then, can lead not only to motivation to write but also to improving the quality of writing.

In the article by Brenda Miller Power entitled "Beyond 'Geddinagrupe': A Case Study of Three First Grade Collaborators", she explains that the idea of collaboration in classrooms is being redefined. In the past, collaboration was "often teacher-directed, teacher-assigned group work" (Power, p. 767), but it is now evolving to be more student centered. Student instigated collaboration seems to be more effective and produce more improvements. Because of the existing successful studies on collaboration, teachers are now trying to discover how to most effectively use collaboration in their classrooms to help students learn to read and write. In the "Geddinagrupe" study, improvements in writing did occur in the three first grade boys in the following areas: length of story, complexity of story, and spelling. Not only did their

actual writing ability improve, but by working together, the boys "were willing to work longer and harder...at projects than they would alone." (Power, p. 773) A hypothesis of why the collaboration was successful was that each boy brought different strengths to the group and could help the others who were weak in those areas. In accordance with previous studies, results showed that by carefully choosing the students that work together, teachers can direct students to learn to work out problems for themselves through group interaction. In addition, effective writing teams can help students improve academically.

In summing up all of the previous information, there is no better example of peer collaboration than Wendy Dedicott's article "Paired Storying, How the Idea Developed", which describes the relationship between a low ability writer, Jabus, and his higher ability writing partner Adam. At the beginning of the study Jabus only wrote in unintelligible scribbles, but after working with the partner, who had made him copy sentences by writing directly underneath them, the boy was able to begin to copy letters very well. Aside from his improving letter formation, he was beginning to gain interest in writing and wanted to be able to

"write" like everyone else. Soon he started copying everything around him! When Jabus wanted to write a story, the teacher would write down all of the words he wanted to use and then he would construct the sentence on his own. He would proudly show his work, boasting "Look, I can write now, Adam helped me yesterday." (Dedicott, p. 170) Not only did Jabus' writing improve, so did his confidence, which in turn led to even more writing. His progress was amazing to Dedicott, who explains that "In just two weeks Jabus had progressed from undefinable letters to quite tidy legible writing." (Dedicott, p. 172) With an example like this, obviously peer collaboration merits further consideration!

METHODS

My project began with the selection of participants. The subjects of this study were six kindergarten and first grade students selected from a class of 22 students. There were 9 students participating altogether, but three were the tutors and their writing was not evaluated. Out of the six students participating, two demonstrated high writing ability, two wrote on an average level for their grade,

and two were beginning writers. Comprising the group were two kindergarten boys, one kindergarten girl, one first grade boy, and two first grade girls. Students were grouped by writing ability, and then two were randomly selected from each group -- high, middle, and beginning. After the initial selection of the six children, I made observations to determine their preferences for working alone or with partners. Based on these observations and their requests, I assigned children to work alone, or to work in pairs with a specific tutor selected on the basis of compatibility. I chose tutor/tutee pairs based on their requests and my judgements of compatibility of the pair.

Taking aside the six whose writing would be evaluated at the end of the study along with the three children functioning as tutors, I told them I was doing a project for my school and then explained the directions I wanted them to follow. Remaining with their assigned partner or remembering to work alone were stressed. I concluded by telling them that every day they wrote something that was their own work I would make Xerox copies for my project. They seemed excited about the project and eager to begin.

Over the next three weeks, I came to the class to collect writing samples and monitor their progress about three times a week. During each of the classroom visits, I would spend about ten minutes with each of the six students, watching them work and talking with them about how they felt about that day's writing. When they were done with a piece, I would collect it and have them go to Xerox it with me. Usually, if there was time left, I would let them work on whatever they wanted to and with whomever they wanted.

At the end of the three weeks, I evaluated and compared papers to determine whether the children working with the peer tutors had improved more than the children working alone. I looked for improvements in three areas: progress in spelling (either more letters or more sounds in a word), longer sentences, and greater number of words in the piece/story. I chose these three areas because according to my research, these are common areas of writing improvement during peer collaboration.

RESULTS

Despite a few problems such as absences, stomach aches during writing time, and writing copied from a

book, the results were good. Out of the three children who worked with a tutor, two showed much improved writing while the third had improved a little. Of the three students writing alone, all remained at about the same level.

S., a first grade girl who worked alone and was a high ability writer, continued at the same level of writing. Her spelling was phonetically accurate at the start and continued at the same level. Both sentence length and number of words were also constant. S. averaged about 29-33 words per story. S. is one of the best writers in the class and continued to write at her high ability level throughout the study.

Working alone, J., the average ability kindergarten girl, also remained at the same level. Her first writing sample contained first letter sounds and familiar words like "mom". Copying from a book and including a line of four words of her own writing at the end of the piece, J. was writing partly her own work and was partly copying from sources around the room -- about average for her grade. By the end of the study, J. demonstrated about the same writing skill, basically she could write some first letters sounds and could write random letters in between.

The third student working alone, a kindergarten boy, showed a small improvement. A beginning writer, D. wrote "dad" and drew all over the page in his first sample of writing. By the end, D. had improved in spelling but was still writing few words on a page. Length of sentence was not considered since he was not up to that level of writing yet. His last day of writing consisted of the letters "A B" on a page, which he later told me meant "the boy". Even though he had no help from a peer tutor, D.'s writing did show improvement.

From the group that worked with tutors, a first grade boy named C. worked with one of his good friends. C., a high ability writer, usually sat next to this friend, who was also a good writer, every day during writing time. Because the two boys sat next to each other does not mean that they developed a tutor/tutee relationship; it was more like parallel writing -- side by side but not together. Even during the study when I asked the two boys to work together they continued their previous writing pattern. C.'s spelling was fairly accurate to begin with and therefore remained the same, as did the length of his sentences. However, C.'s writing did progress in length of story. In his

first sample, C. wrote 15 words and filled the rest of the page with pictures, while his last sample had progressed to 35 words. Interestingly, he still drew about the same amount of pictures, but his words were written smaller on the page.

Of average writing ability, A., a first grade girl, chose to work with another first grade girl. The two had been working together on and off since the beginning of the year and were compatible partners. A.'s writing did improve measurably while working with a partner. Consisting mostly of strings of random letters and a picture of a tree, her first sample was a little below her ability. She explained to me that her picture was an apple tree and pointed to a string of letters "ABPOS" saying it spelled "apples". As she worked with her partner, her spelling progressed from mostly random letters to some letter sounds of the words. Also, the number of words she wrote per story increased from one or two words to between five and seven words. It is hard to compare the length of her sentences, since she often wrote several individual words on a page instead of a sentence. As we reached the end of the study, her last sample of writing showed great progress. It contained several words written in

various places on the page: "I Lid SI DAVS hE e NiS". According to A., it read "I like Scottie Davis he is nice." A. seemed to have picked up a lot of first letter sounds and small words like "he" from working with her tutor.

The last subject, F. was a kindergarten boy in the beginning stages of writing. In fact, his first sample contained not only random letters but letter like symbols. Interestingly, F. usually either wrote "words" or drew pictures, he rarely put both on the same page. He worked fairly well with his partner, but was partly independent in his writing. F. might ask for help with one sound but then try to figure out the rest for himself. From his first sample of random letters and symbols, F. progressed to spelling "elephant" in his last writing sample. He wrote the letters "ltreF" to spell elephant, and in fact he did have some of the correct sounds of the word. This sample also shows that he progressed to writing all letters with no symbols.

DISCUSSION

Each time I arrived, the six would eagerly come up and ask me to come over and watch them work. Not only

were the students who worked with partners excited, the children working individually were excited to show off their work as well. Not only because of the excitement and enjoyment, but also because of the excellent results, I feel that the study went very well.

I also feel that measurable academic gains resulted from the study. Since two of the "tutee" students did show writing improvement, I feel the project was successful, and I will further study its use in my own classroom. Because peer tutoring seems to have potential to help children improve their writing, teachers need to further investigate its uses in the classroom. Since my sample of subjects was small, I cannot conclude that peer collaboration is definitely effective, however, enough similarities to Wendy Dedicott's article were found that I do feel it is worthy of further consideration and hopefully further study. If this is a possible way to increase students' academic gains as well as foster social interaction, I think it is definitely worth a closer look.

From my own observations, I believe that further study on the peer tutoring process would be best focused on beginning and low ability writers paired

with high ability writers. Not only does the tutee have a positive role model to work with, he can observe what "real" writing looks like.

Although not too many studies seem to have been done to determine the effectiveness of peer tutoring in writing, I feel that the process has great potential, and I would like to see more classrooms incorporate it into their writing program in the future and report the results.

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